



A Writer's Inspiration

A Writer's Inspiration: Become An “Enormous Noticer”

“Whatever you have lived, you can write—& by hard work & a genuine apprenticeship, you can learn to write well; but what you have not lived you cannot write, you can only pretend to write it...”

– Mark Twain

Objective: Students will test the value of humor by reflecting on the observations they make in everyday life and writing about them.

Overview:

In this activity, students are asked to consider Mark Twain as “the enormous noticer,” and to think about the humor that Twain found in the ordinary, everyday details of life. Challenge students to find the humor in the details and record them in their journals.

Samuel Clemens, who came to be known as Mark Twain, was a natural-born storyteller who was one of the first writers to recognize that art could be created out of the American language. Through his use of carefully chosen words and his sharply honed humor, he dealt head-on with controversial issues that others were afraid to confront.

Much of what Twain noticed as a boy growing up in the small Mississippi River town of Hannibal, Missouri found its way into his writings in books such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He was always noticing whether people had their hands in their pockets or not, how they dressed, walked, spoke, or presented themselves to others. Consider this passage from the first chapter of *Tom Sawyer*:

*A stranger was before him – boy a shade larger than himself...
This boy was well-dressed, too well-dressed on a week-day.*

This was simply astounding. His cap was a dainty thing, his close-buttoned blue cloth roundabout was new and natty, and so were his pantaloons. He had shoes on—and it was only Friday. He even wore a necktie, a bright bit of ribbon. He had a citified air about him that ate into Tom’s vitals.

Activity:

1. Let’s find out how much you notice on a typical day. Today, pay special attention to all the details, large and small, of your route home from school, of places, buildings and people.
2. Make a list of what you see. Try to recall as much detail as you can.
3. On a separate sheet of paper, write a short passage that changes some of the details of what you noticed on your route home into something humorous. Think about a monologue or episode of your favorite comedy show that relies on the “noticing” of details and the sparing use of facts.
4. Share what you’ve written with your classmates.

All good humorists are “enormous noticers.” Through keen observation and wit, they help us discover truths about our lives and society. Like Mark Twain, they find the inspiration for humor in the little details of real-life situations that aren’t necessarily intended to be funny.

Extended Activity:

Ask students to read the first two chapters of *Tom Sawyer*, looking for details that they think Samuel Clemens might have drawn from his boyhood memories in Hannibal.

Passages are available in chapter one of the [Interactive Scrapbook](#) online, as well as [Selected Writings](#). Have your students make notes and share their findings in a class discussion. Encourage them to read the rest of the book.

National Standards

This activity fulfills the following standards established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

This activity fulfills the following standards established by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).

Language Arts: Writing

2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
4. Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

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